

Call to Action: Now and the Future

COVID-19 and Gender Equality, Global Peace and Security

The impact of COVID-19 is deeply gendered. A rights-based approach and gender-conflict analysis must therefore be at the centre of global response and recovery. This must assess not only the virus's disproportionate impact on people, communities and countries based on their intersecting identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, disability, class, age and social-economic status; but also takes into account how this pandemic is impacting conflict dynamics which are also gendered in themselves. The Women, Peace and Security agenda provides an essential framework for analysing and responding to COVID-19. Through UNSCR 1325 and its associated resolutions, the International Community - including governments, donors, multilateral institutions and INGOs - have already committed to taking a gendered approach to conflict and crises. This also applies to COVID-19, all responses should therefore ensure the implementation of existing commitments on gender equality and women and girls' rights that have been made.

2020 marks the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. This was due to be a global 'moment' where the world reflected on progress made and challenges that limit progress. At this time of compounding global crisis, the world needs to work together to implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda and related international standards and ensure that COVID-19 does not exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Instead, the global response to COVID-19 must be explicitly gendered and prioritise peace. While each country, region, city, town and rural area will be impacted differently, responses must acknowledge that no country is unaffected by the crisis and that it will have long-term impacts on communities, the socio-economic system and on conflict and peace dynamics. There are already worrying examples of unequal access to healthcare. For all solutions that emerge in the next 12-18 months, from reliable testing to vaccines, this unequal access must be mitigated. There is also evidence that inequality will reflect the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls' rights, peace and security. As a result, the Women, Peace and Security agenda should be applied to the COVID-19 response in the UK and internationally.

Immediate and Long-term Gender, Peace and Security Impacts:

There are already immediate and long-term impacts of COVID-19 which require a rights-based approach that is based on gender-conflict analysis, accounting for the differential impact on women and girls as well as peace and security:

- **Women and Girls' Participation, Leadership and Decision-Making:** At a global and national level, women and girls are already being excluded from the decision-making in COVID-19 response, despite their active participation in the response itself. Only 29 Heads of State are women and only 25% of the senior leadership positions in healthcare are women, yet women make up 70% of healthcare workers. For the gendered differential of COVID-19 to be included in national and global responses, women and girls must be included in decision-making. Women rights and women-led organisations will play a critical role in in the short and long-term COVID-19 response. The international community should acknowledge this by engaging with women, girls and women's rights organisations as experts and partners. To ensure the response meets women and girls' rights, needs and experiences, it is essential that women and girls meaningfully participate in the design and implementation of preparedness and response programmes, plans and policies.
- **Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG):** VAWG is already a global pandemic, with the killing of women and girls by intimate partners or family members rising globally. Studies of crisis and conflict, including epidemics such as the Ebola outbreak, show VAWG increases during emergencies, including Intimate Partner Violence, sexual exploitation and abuse and child marriage. Emerging evidence from a growing number of COVID-19 affected countries show the same worrying trend. In many countries measures taken to contain the outbreak, including social distancing, self-isolation, quarantining, school closures and lockdown measures are already restricting mobility, confining women and girls with their abusers for long periods of time and leaving them without access to the vital support that they

need. Evidence is also emerging that measures introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are inadvertently putting women and girls at increased risk of other forms of VAWG such as sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse from male-dominated security forces and other state and community officials tasked with enforcing lockdowns, movement restrictions and quarantines. Protection services such as hotlines, refuges and financial support for survivors is lifesaving. These must be funded and easily accessible to account for the increases in VAWG and restricted mobility measures that are in place, including on organisations delivering essential refuge and support services. Critical VAWG response services such as Safe Spaces, case management and psychosocial support run the risk of being shut down which would cut off lifesaving support for survivors and at-risk women and girls. Responses to COVID-19 must acknowledge that VAWG programming is essential and lifesaving in the same way that WASH, shelter and food security are lifesaving.

- **Peace and Security:** During COVID-19, peace is at even greater risk due to economic decline, global recession, job losses, health inequality, food insecurity, destabilisation, loss of social connections, resource scarcity, decreases in public services, increases in tensions, misuse of power and militarism. The longer-term impact of this on peace and on women and girls' rights risks increased instability and conflict. Immediately, a global ceasefire is essential as conflict, proxy wars and bombings are still ongoing as the virus continues to spread. In line with the Women, Peace and Security commitments and the evidence that inclusive peace processes lead to more sustainable outcomes, the short and long-term responses to COVID-19 must be gendered. Ceasefire agreements need to be inclusive, even at the informal stage. Women and girls' participation, including in informal discussions, is essential to shaping the agenda and the roadmap to peace. The role of women and, where appropriate girls, as mediators and agents of change, and their rights, needs and experiences must form a part of the future of peace and security. In the longer-term, gender-conflict analysis must be an intrinsic part of all COVID-19 responses, particularly in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS), as peace and security will be increasingly affected by the impact of COVID-19. The Women, Peace and Security agenda must therefore be applied.

- **Emergency Legislation:** As countries globally declare states of emergencies and enact legislation to respond to COVID-19, civil society space is being restricted by measures which also increase powers to security and justice sectors to curb the spread of the virus. These measures must be proportionate to the evaluated risk, time-bound, subject to parliamentary scrutiny and regular review, and applied in a non-discriminatory way. These laws must only be used for legitimate public health protection and not by states to silent dissent or restrict civil society space including the work of women's rights organisations and movements to hold governments to account for upholding women and girls' rights. Ultimately any infringement on the work of youth and women's rights organisations and movements will affect long-term governance, peacebuilding and women and girls' rights and their participation in peace and security issues. Responses should monitor, track and address the restrictions on and impact of limiting civil society space by ensuring that governments do not abuse their power and commitment to protect human rights. The slow erosion of civic freedoms and gender equality is dangerous for women and girls' rights and the long-term recovery and health of communities.

- **Livelihoods, Insecure Work and Women's Economic Rights:** Livelihoods are already being impacted by COVID-19. This particularly affects women and girls in insecure work who are not given the protection of formal employment. Women and girls already affected by conflict will be disproportionately impacted as they are overrepresented in informal, unpaid or low paid work. COVID-19 will restrict their livelihoods and economic opportunities even further. Coupled with the disruption of supply chains and markets, and a potential loss of income due to the mortality or illness of other household income earners, the economic impact of COVID-19 on women and girls will be long-term and widespread. In humanitarian settings interventions such as cash transfers, vouchers, food stamps, sanitary pads, reproductive health services and in-kind assistance are lifesaving and should continue and scale, with safety modifications. Women's Economic Empowerment and rights and economic Justice should therefore reform part of the COVID-19 response to ensure that the negative impacts on women and girls' livelihoods and employment are mitigated during and post COVID-19, and that after the crisis we build a transformative economy and more equal world.

- **Unpaid Care:** Globally, women perform 76.2% of unpaid care work which is three times more than men. With the stay at home measures and the closures of school there is a further increased burden on women and girls of caregiving and domestic work which can be either alongside or replace women and girls' paid work or education and impacts women and girls' lives and wellbeing. SDG 5.4 commitments to "the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and family", implementation of this goal is even more critical during the pandemic. Those with care responsibilities who are self-employed and/or work in the informal economy will be severely affected by the

pandemic. Unpaid care increases in conflict, it is essential that long-term responses to COVID-19 address its gendered impact, including financial instability and women and girls' unpaid care.

- **Social Protection:** Social protection systems will be overstretched and likely to be underfunded due to COVID-19. This will be further affected as insecurity and instability increase. Moreover, social safety nets are often not available to refugees and displaced people who may be excluded or do not have the necessary identity documents to qualify. In countries already fragile or conflict-affected, no such safety nets may exist. The intersection of COVID-19 impacts on conflict and instability will affect state support and protection given to the women and girls' who need it most. It is essential that such funding continues and acknowledges the gendered nature of social protection. Social protection systems that are universal, gender responsive and conflict sensitive should be established and strengthened post COVID-19.
- **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR):** Access to, legislation restricting, and provision of SRHR services are already affected by COVID-19, including shortages in medications, such as contraceptives, antiretrovirals for HIV and AIDS and antibiotics, and diminished access to safe abortion care. Financial resources that would have otherwise been used for such health and rights programmes also face the risk of being diverted to COVID-19 response, as seen in the Ebola response in West Africa. Where gender identity and sexual orientation is not acknowledged or illegal, LGBTQI communities are likely to experience increased limitations on their access to and provision of SRHR services which could lead to further suppression of their rights. These impacts must be understood in a context where SRHR provisions have been reduced due to the impact of the so-called 'Global Gag Rule'. As a result, it is vital to monitor and prevent governments from using COVID-19 to pass measures that further restrict access to SRHR in law and in practice.
- **Militarism:** The current COVID-19 global rhetoric is highly militarised with references to 'war on the virus' regularly used. The response to COVID-19 needs to be comprehensive and acknowledge that its people, communities and countries that are affected. A militarised and securitised approach not only increases violence in the community, but also risks the re-traumatisation of communities already affected by conflict. Weapons and international arms transfers should stop as it is in direct contradiction to calls for a global ceasefire by the UN Secretary General. In the face of a global pandemic, governments cannot continue to invest more in militarism than in their public healthcare infrastructure. This should feed into global learning where militarism cannot be the answer to COVID-19 and crisis.
- **Technology:** As the world looks to adapt to online solutions and dialogue, access to technology for women and girls, the time required to engage in online platforms is not universal. Such approaches should assess the impact these platforms have on women and girls in all their diversity, who may not have access or safe access to such technology. Whilst technology can offer important and creative solutions, increased usage of ICTs during the COVID-19 will increase the risk of online violence and abuse against women and girls, which will need to be addressed.

Recommendations:

We recommend the International Community, including the UK Government implements the following:

1. **Disaggregated Data:** Data should be disaggregated by, at least, sex, age and disability. Too often in crisis, disaggregated data on the gendered impact is collected long after the crisis begins. Such data on virus contraction, deaths, treatment and programme participants is crucial to understanding intersectional gender differences and effectiveness of programming. It should be collected immediately and regularly as contexts change.
2. **Gender Analysis:** Rapid gender assessments should take place in the short-term and intersectional gender-conflict analysis in medium to long-term to ensure adequate gendered responses in pandemic preparedness and response and in peacebuilding and security interventions. Such analysis will identify the different impact of COVID-19 on women, girls, men and boys, with close attention on differentials within and between countries, and gendered root causes of conflict.
3. **Funding:** In line with the UK Gender Equality Act, all COVID-19 response funding should meet the OSCE Gender Equality Markers (GEM) 1 and 2 to ensure that programmes respond to women and girls' rights, needs and experiences. As a result, all funding business cases, and funding proposals should be required to include comprehensive gender analyses and protection mainstreaming provisions. This requires gender experts to be involved in the design and delivery of COVID-19 response programming. COVID-19 response funding should not divert of

funding and human resources away from gender and Women, Peace and Security work when such funding and expertise be prioritised.

4. Women's Rights Organisations: Women's rights organisations should be recognised for their critical role through funding and partnership which acknowledges their expertise in their contexts and their essential roles in service delivery, programming and holding governments and international institutions accountable. They should be funded with core, long-term, flexible funding for their self-defined priorities as they adapt their work in the short and long-term to deal with the gendered impact of COVID-19.

5. Prioritise Inclusive Peace: Peacebuilding funding and interventions should continue in the short and long-term and should not be de-prioritised. Such programming should ensure COVID-19 responses are gender and conflict sensitive, and that peacebuilding actors (community groups, local, national and international organisations) are able to continue their work and are using their presence, networks and expertise to support community-based COVID-19 efforts. The role of women mediators in international, national and community dialogue should also be supported. Funding should also be provided for information and knowledge sharing of trauma informed responses contexts already affected by conflict to mitigate against re-traumatisation.

6. VAWG: Responses to COVID-19 should address the increased risk of VAWG, including to women and girls who face multiple and intersecting discriminations, and put in place funding and measures to prevent and respond to VAWG. This includes funding, ensuring that lifesaving VAWG services, including helplines and refuges/shelters are classified as essential services, providing safeguarding advice to women and girls at risk of VAWG in official guidance and communications, working with the security and justice sector to protect women and girls, and ensure access to justice for survivors of violence. Such funding should be additional to existing VAWG programming and advocacy funding.

7. Emergency Legislation: Legislation restricting freedom of movement and association may be necessary in the short-term to reduce the spread of COVID-19, however, such legislation and increased powers should only remain in place in immediate response to the public health emergency and not be in place long-term. These should be closely monitored, and women's rights organisations should be consulted on their use and misuse to ensure that they do not restrict civil society space, and human rights activism and advocacy.

8. COVID-19 Equal Access: Access to healthcare solutions such as testing, and vaccines should be universal. This should ensure that people based in FCAS have as equal access to such healthcare solutions as those in donor states.

9. Context-specific Programming and Impact Monitoring: Short and long-term programming should account for the differential gendered impact of COVID-19 in each context as well as the need for tailored communications and messaging which accounts for country, region and intersectional identities. The use of social and mainstream media for public information messages should be monitored as levels of trust in media and Government information varies, as does the misuse of media by authorities. Such monitoring should include any stigmatisation of specific intersectional identities.

10. Inclusive access to technologies: Access to, and use of technologies should consider the security implications for women and girls' participation and how online decision-making processes and consultation can exclude underrepresented groups, with consideration of alternative ways in which to ensure that those who may be excluded are still heard.

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS):

GAPS is the UK's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) civil society network. We are a membership organisation of NGOs and experts in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. We were founded to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide. Website: www.gaps-uk.org Email: info@gaps-uk.org Twitter: [@NoWomenNoPeace](https://twitter.com/NoWomenNoPeace)

This paper is an immediate response to Gender Equality, COVID-19 and peace and security. The data and analysis to date is primarily anecdotal and as the pandemic and its impact develops, increased resources will be available. This paper aims at ensuring responses are gendered and the Women, Peace and Security agenda is applied. A bibliography of resources can be found on the GAPS [website here](#).